

Chapter 196 - Against Time

Kai slumped his shoulders. "I've already signed your papers. I can reach my house and be back on my own."

"I don't doubt that, but the streets are dangerous at night, and we can't risk any *unintentional* leak of information on a mundane contract. I'll see you on board." Seryne vanished down a corridor with unhurried steps, likely enjoying how their extensive negotiations had left him no time to pack or argue.

Damn her.

"Let's go." Kai strolled to what he thought was the exit. The walk to his house would take ten minutes at a steady pace, which made twenty to get to the airdock. He had a library of journals and loose papers to gather, not to mention clothes and other necessities.

I'm going to strangle every single one of them one day.

"The exit is this way." Officer Makyn gestured to a door in the opposite direction. The man was in his late twenties, eyes like shards of ice, short military haircut, spotless uniform and no funny mustache. He could have used one, he looked cold even by the garrison standards.

Kai decided he would break that façade. This was the only petty revenge available to him, caution be damned. All he wanted was to be cozily wrapped in his warm bed instead of out here, bullied into helping.

What's the point of worrying about tomorrow when you can have satisfaction today?

He turned on his heels in the direction indicated. "Do you mind walking before me? People will clear the way faster when they spot your friendly face."

With a grunt of confirmation, stoic-boy took the lead.

Hmm... did I get rusty? It has been a while...

Nagging was an art he had honed through many years and hefty sacrifices—Elijah and Moui's especially. It was essential to determine how far he could push his target before they bit back. "So, what do you do in your free time? I mean apart from perfecting your menacing gaze in the mirror. Any hobbies? I bet you're an enforcer like Seryne is an inspector!"

Stone-face ignored his amicable attempts at conversation, walking faster. He could have used a few lessons in etiquette.

Tough crowd, eh? Worry not, I never give up on difficult cases.

Curious about his grunt friend, Kai extended Mana Sense through the wards of the precinct to probe him. The results shocked him—almost as much as the man turning on him with the murderous look of a cornered drake.

These stupid wards are messing with my skills. Why the fuck did I get a yellow babysitter? He must be at Moui's level, that's complete overkill.

“I thought we should get to know each other since we’ll be spending time together.” Kai smiled sheepishly. “You must be good at beating the soul out of people to reach yellow so young, huh? Or are you older than you look? What kind of moisturizer do you use? Do you have a sample? I dabble in Alchemy so I make my own.”

The blabbering nonsense worked its magic. Grumpy-dude lost his homicidal glare and stood back, looking *almost* repentant. “Do not do that again. I don’t like to be startled.”

Duly noted. He's sensitive about his age.

Kai was welcomed by the chilly night air and familiar surroundings. He strode down the most direct road to his house. They must have spent a couple hours inside the headquarters: taverns and pubs were alight with voice and music, but the streets were deserted.

“Do you know how much longer we have?”

“About forty-six minutes. The zeppelin leaves at midnight.”

Shit.

“Hurry!” Kai sprinted down the hill, uncaring of his demeanor. He’d get half an hour to pack for an indefinite stay.

Shirts, notebooks, can I pack my cauldron? I'd also need to carry herbs... this is a nightmare!

“Do you want me to carry you home?” Serious-boy offered. “We’d move faster.”

Kai couldn’t tell if he was teasing him or if it was an honest proposal. “No, but thanks for the offer. It’s nice that long-legged people want to help the less fortunate.” Channeling a trickle of Empower into his run, he sped across the Ring Road to his destination.

The door opened on his first knock, Flynn stood there with disheveled hair and spirited eyes. “Kai! Are you okay? I thought—oh...” His gaze fell on his stoic companion.

“They were so taken by my expertise, I got hired to tend a nest of grouchy snakes.” Kai slipped inside and shut the door. Quick-boy already inside.

Damned distrustful babysitter. I'd curse you if you weren't totally right.

“Snakes...?” Flynn looked between them, brain trying to catch on. “What are you talking about and who’s this?”

He’ll piece together the clues later.

“Yeah, that’s why the Republic kindly recruited me.” Kai theatrically winked within the boundaries of the contract of silence. “I’ve no time to explain, I need to pack my notes of the Vastaire and leave. The friendly neighbor who’s giving me the stink eye is my porter, Mabin. What, Mabin? I’ve kept your identity secret and he’s going to see which books are missing anyway.”

Mabin struggled to respond to such solid reasoning. “We could have taken them all.”

“You have no idea how many books I have. Why don’t you sit down and relax while I get my things? Have something to drink, eat a snack. We should still have some mango ice cream.”

“I’m here to assist you.”

Spirits, why did I need to get the zealous, paranoid officer? I already signed their stupid contract. What does he think I’ll do if he let me out of his sight...? He shouldn’t suspect an innocent twelve-year-old.

“Everything’ll be fine,” he gave Flynn a reassuring smile.

Kai marched up the stairs with clingy-guy stepping on his shadow. There was no time to scheme or ponder—perhaps that was why Seryne wanted him to leave tonight. “Here’s my room. Don’t touch anything unless I tell you.”

The place was decently tidy apart from his work desk where his cauldron and tools waited to be cleaned. Every paper was neatly piled in its place and the scent of herbs filled the air.

Kai rummaged through his wardrobe for his old spatial backpack, the runes were double engraved and holding strong. “Less gaping and more helping, Mabin. We need to pack every piece of paper and leather on these six shelves and two boxes. Be careful, some of these books are old. I’ll hold you responsible if I find any rips or wrinkles.”

Snoopy-boy stopped contemplating the Alchemy and Engraving equipment and got to work. Kai had made no secret of his crafting abilities through his sales, though the Republic might not have been paying attention.

They’ll do it now. I bet this will go straight into my file.

He was going to yell at the unfairness of life later, first he needed to gather every scrap of information on the Vastaire. He wouldn’t give the Republic any excuse to search his house by missing something.

The journals were on their shelves since he had made little progress researching the space anomaly. Kai combed his bedroom for any stray paper while his porter fit the bulk of the

material inside the backpack. Mr. Suspicion never took his eyes off him, as if he'd leave unsanctioned clues.

I can't be too obvious. Hopefully, I've given Flynn enough hints.

"That's everything. How much time's left?"

"Fourteen minutes," clock-guy answered without hesitation. "Five till we go."

Kai bit back a curse and darted around his room. He threw random clothes, potions and equipment inside a second bag. His mom would have disowned him if she saw such sloppy luggage. "Done." He forced the flap close, tying the latches.

Note to self: keep a bag ready for emergency evacuation. Damn, I wanted to bring my cauldron...

His handy porter grabbed both bags, jaw clenched when he lifted the spatial backpack. Even with the enchantments halving the load, it must weigh half a ton.

At least he doesn't go out of his way to be an asshole. Or is he just committed to being here 'to help'?

"Don't hold it by the straps or you'll risk tearing it." The beast leather would hold, but why should Kai take the chance. "C'mon, it's my favorite spatial bag and I wasn't the one asking for this."

"Do not try anything stupid," paranoid-guy muttered before switching hold.

Does he think it's a plot to slow down his reaction when I stab him? Can't say I didn't consider that, though that's a bit much. Maybe he's just thinking I'd run...

"I'm incapable of doing something stupid even if I tried. Time?"

"Thirty seconds."

There was a hundred percent chance he had forgotten something he would remember as soon as they left. They headed downstairs to find Flynn waiting with two bags of his own. "I'm coming with you."

"You're not." Kai's heart warmed at the attempt despite its foolishness. "There's no reason we both go feed grouchy snakes."

Even if he could convince Seryne he needed an assistant—which was doubtful—, it was a terrible idea to drag them both under the scrutiny of the Republic. Flynn was the last person who should attract their attention, especially when he was weakened from the discard.

"We need to go now." Officer Makyn picked this time to act bossy.

Right when I was starting to like you.

“It’ll take a minute. Go wait outside or we’ll end up wasting longer.” Kai held his gaze, wondering if Mr. Death-stare would bump him on the head and carry him with the bags.

“One minute. I won’t ask again.” Nosy-boy left the door ajar, standing within earshot.

Could be worse.

Flynn nervously chewed his lip. “I won’t let you go alone.”

“There is no need to stab yourself in the leg for solidarity.” Kai wished he had the time and privacy to explain. Alas... “You can barely stand on your feet without a profession. You’ll be more helpful here. Someone needs to warn my family and Reishi I’ll be away for a while, and keep an eye out for the *usual* things.”

“I—”

Kai looked straight into his worried eyes. “It’s the best way and you know it.”

Stubbornness and conflict struggled before falling to begrudging resignation. “Fine.” Flynn deflated, leaning against a wall. “At least take my lucky ring, I’ll feel better if you have it. I’ve kept enough Luck for myself.”

Kai took a second to get his meaning and two more to decide. He grabbed his spatial artifact, confirming the Fate Fulcrum wasn’t inside anymore. It’d be a risk if discovered, but he wouldn’t be burned as a heretic. The secret closet contained the notebooks with his investigation in the ruins, his best potions and an arsenal of weapons including his enchanted sword.

What’s the point of having good stuff if I don’t use it when it matters?

“Thanks,” he put the silver band back on his finger. “Be safe and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Same for you.” Flynn gave him a smirk that was only slightly forced. “I’ll take care of things and continue my work. You be careful.”

“Always am. See you soon.” With a curse for the forced timeline, Kai closed the door behind him.

His trusty sidekick waited below a lamplight, sizing him up with an inscrutable look. “Hold on, we can’t be late.” The man didn’t wait to lift him like he was another bag.

“What are you do—” His protests were swallowed by the wind. Without warning, Mr. Jerk raced up the streets to the airdock at break-neck speed.

Shit.

He held on for his life, ribs grinding against his steel grip. Muscle-dude carried his luggage on one shoulder, spatial backpack in one arm and him in the other. There was some mana skill going on, but Kai couldn't focus enough to examine it without getting discovered.

They must have looked ridiculous. Thank the spirits, there was no one to witness his indignity. Except for a man hugging a tree too drunk to remember them.

The ride got bumpier up the hill. It was a relief when vengeful-guy put him down in front of an enchanted fence. Kai wobbled on his legs, heaving like he had been the one running. "Was that necessary? You bruised my ribs."

Is this what it's like to have a physical yellow profession? I should have asked Moui to show me his limits.

"You wanted time to say goodbye and told me not to carry your backpack by the straps." The insolent porter explained with cold logic.

Kai was sure he was being made fun of, though there was no sign in the tone.

He's more devious than he looks.

"Can you walk to the berth?"

"I can." Kai stumbled forward, hands raised defensively to prevent being grabbed again. The enclosure around the airdock blocked Perception skills and was patrolled by guards that interrogated anyone who strayed too close.

The berth tower was a critical infrastructure through which the wealthiest mainlanders traveled, and hundreds of gold coins were transported. No expenses were spared to ensure the safety of the facility.

And yet, the obstacles that had thwarted his curiosity for so long proved no match for a sheet of paper with a hawk sigil. They were easily waved through, though Kai got no chance to snoop around as they raced the last stretch.

The airdock sat at the top of the smaller hill, it occupied the space of three mansions on prime estate. Anchored by taut chains to the berth tower, a silver zeppelin floated ten meters off the ground. Shrouded by darkness, its large oblong shape covered the moons.

Kai couldn't stop himself from gawking. He had always seen them zip by in the sky, often no more than a dot on the horizon. Up close it was the size of a blue whale, a behemoth placidly hovering in the air. Two pairs of rotor blades buzzed on tiny fins, and a slim gondola with round windows cropped underneath.

"Our ride leaves in two minutes." Officer Makyn rushed him inside the high building.

They climbed several flights of stairs and popped out on a narrow platform near the top. A hanging bridge linked them to the gondola of the zeppelin. Kai stepped on the swaying wooden boards, the troubles of the night forgotten before the flying vessel.

He wanted to sail on one since he had set foot in Higharbor. The night turned to day when he used Mana Sense, the ship was covered in a web of cloaked arrays brimming with power. Despite their similar appearance, its workings differed greatly from helium balloons used on Earth in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Kai recognized delicate Air runes and obscure Gravity runes, their shapes shifted as he looked to hide their workings. He wouldn't have minded staying on the suspension bridge to admire the marvel of magical engineering for days, unfortunately, he had impatient-guy pressing him forward.

With one last step, the door locked shut behind him.